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SUBJECT: MEDVEDEV: MANAGING A FOREIGN POLICY NOVICE

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[1](#)B. MOSCOW 179
[1](#)C. MOSCOW 270

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns: 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Given Dmitriy Medvedev's foreign policy inexperience and disastrous initiation in Russia's Ukrainian policy, we are likely to see a period of extended "regency," with Putin strongly influencing the shape and direction of the Medvedev administration. The awkwardness inherent in this transition has already led Chancellor Merkel to propose a Moscow visit in March, when both the President and President-elect can be consulted without the protocol complications that arise when Putin shifts to the White House. There is no institutional counterpoint to the presidency in Russian foreign policy decisionmaking. While advocates of a Putin third term see the current President as indispensable, moderates hope that as Medvedev comes up to speed, Putin will disengage. His European orientation, refreshing lack (to date) of anti-Western demagoguery, and the ideological elasticity of "Plan Putin" give Medvedev room to maneuver. Managing relations with the U.S. may prove to be Medvedev's most difficult account, and one he has shied away from tackling. End Summary

Beware the Foreign Policy Novice

[1](#)2. (C) If Dmitriy Medvedev's biography gives hope to liberals that a reform course will be charted internally (ref a), the next president's almost complete lack of foreign policy credentials fuels speculation about Putin's sustained influence over Russia's relations with the world. As Carnegie Center's Dmitriy Trenin underscored to us, Medvedev's one known foreign policy gambit was a fiasco, when -- from his position as Putin's representative on the Gazprom Board -- he oversaw Russia's ruinous gas war with Ukraine in winter 2006. From allowing Ukraine to prolong inconclusive negotiations, to issuing the New Year's diktat on the gas cutoff, failing to foresee the European reaction to Russian tactics, and missing the public relations dimension to the crisis, Medvedev flunked an early leadership test. World Economy Institute analyst Aleksandr Tsipko separately agreed with Trenin's analysis, and argued that Medvedev also was linked to the Kremlin's misadventure in deploying "political technologists" to attempt to shore up the Yanukovich regime after the rigged elections of November 2004, which former Deputy Minister for Energy Milov also confirmed. Observers believe that Medvedev's initial mis-steps steered him away from greater involvement in foreign policy.

[1](#)3. (C) While Medvedev, as the presumptive next president of Russia, met with Serbian Radical leader Nikolic on January 28 and is slated to meet Jordanian King Abdullah in mid-February, he has kept his foreign policy comments to generalities (ref b). Several foreign policy experts with

ties to the Kremlin told us that there is no Medvedev foreign policy team; to the contrary, Trenin noted that an informal think tank organized to support Medvedev (primarily on the international economic front) by Renaissance Capital Chairman Igor Yurgens was shuttered in early 2007. Kremlin watchers, such as Profile magazine's Svetlana Babayeva, are not aware of think tank types being tasked to brief Medvedev on foreign policy issues, with the Kremlin-commissioned Center for Political Technologies Deputy Director Boris Makarenko telling us "it's not in the cards: Medvedev's team is Putin's team." While Trenin interprets the absence of activity harshly -- as indicative of Medvedev's disinterest in asserting his autonomy -- others view this as evidence of the "regency" period that will follow the May 7 inauguration.

Enter Putin as Regent

14. (C) Not surprisingly, it is the same die-hard advocates of a third term for Putin who now posit the current President's indispensability on the grounds of Medvedev's foreign policy inexperience. Foundation for Effective Politics Director Gleb Pavlovskiy spun to us that the one issue preventing Putin from walking away from the Kremlin was management of foreign affairs, suggesting -- less credibly -- that this, rather than siloviki politics, had been the "tipping" point. Having reasserted Russian influence on the international stage, Pavlovskiy said that Putin could not leave the "conceptualization" of Russia's next steps to a novice president, particularly in a system where the Foreign Ministry implements, but does not drive, decisionmaking.

15. (C) The presumption of many Russian analysts is that we will see a period of extended "regency," with Putin strongly influencing the course of Medvedev's policy, even if the new president's tone has less of the harsh rhetorical edge characteristic of Putin's Munich address. A longstanding Medvedev booster, Andranik Migranyan (who was tapped by the Kremlin to head up Russia's New York-based Institute for Democracy), affirmed that Medvedev will not seek any dramatic foreign policy initiatives and in the first few months of his presidency will take his cues from Putin and Putin's advisers. An equally strong presumption is that an already opaque decisionmaking process will remain cloaked in mystery.

The challenge, Center for Political Technologies Deputy Makarenko stressed, will be to divine when Putin stops playing Cardinal Richelieu to Medvedev's King Louis XV.

16. (C) There is intense speculation over how this period of regency will translate into the conduct of foreign policy. At some point, Trenin stressed, the crutches have to be put aside and the president has to walk into a summit alone, not as a member of a foreign policy team. The level of uncertainty both over Medvedev's foreign policy confidence and Putin's willingness to cede the international limelight has even raised questions over who will represent Russia at the June EU Troika summit in Russia and at the July G8 Summit in Hokkeido, with Makarenko positing that -- however awkward -- Putin may accompany Medvedev on some of his first forays. To our knowledge, the Germans are the first off the mark in seeking to capitalize on the post-election, pre-inaugural window (March 3-May 7) to have Merkel meet both the President and President-elect without any of the protocol complications that arise when Putin moves to the White House. (The visit proposal, still close hold, was made during Head of Chancellery de Mazierre's January 30-31 consultations.)

No Institutional Recourse for Medvedev

17. (C) There is broad agreement in the expert community with Pavlovskiy's conclusion that we are unlikely to see a strong Foreign Minister or Security Council Secretary appointed as a "balance" to a president weak on foreign policy. "Foreign policy is the Tsar's gold," Trenin told us, and like the nuclear "suitcase" is husbanded carefully in the Presidential Administration. Where Trenin and other political moderates take issue with Pavlovskiy is that they

hope the regency represents an "exit strategy" for Putin -- assuming Medvedev comes up to speed, Putin can disengage, perhaps stepping down as Prime Minister after a year or two; if Medvedev falters, this scenario would have Putin toppling him and starting the succession project over again.

¶8. (C) However, who sits where in the Medvedev administration will provide further insight on the scope of the regency. For instance, Ekho Moskvyy Chief Editor Aleksey Venediktov posits that Lavrov's retention as Foreign Minister or replacement by Sergey Ivanov would indicate Putin's stamp, whereas Presidential economic adviser Igor Shuvalov's elevation would reflect Medvedev's preference. We are told that Lavrov's schedule has been kept open after mid-March. The continued vacancy in the Security Council since Igor Ivanov's July 2007 resignation keeps alive idle speculation that Putin still may take up this sinecure; however, we find the chatter unpersuasive given Putin's repeated public pledges to accept the position of premier in a Medvedev government. While the role of the Security Council is amorphous the next Secretary's appointment will provide additional tea leaves to read on the Medvedev-Putin division of foreign policy responsibilities.

Medvedev's Room for Maneuver

¶9. (C) Still, foreign policy experts do not hesitate to describe Medvedev as pro-West, with a strong European orientation, whose less confrontational style could quickly set a different tone to Russia's relations abroad. Medvedev's Western tilt, Migranyan argued, can manifest itself in strange ways, largely because it collides with the standing Russian resentment of the West's "tutoring" in the 1990's. Nonetheless, Migranyan predicted that Medvedev would eventually work his way to a less chauvinistic foreign policy. Trenin, more critical in his estimation of Medvedev's ability to "grow into Putin's shoes," nonetheless welcomed the few hints embedded in Medvedev's campaign speeches: no hysteria-mongering over Western enemies, acknowledgment that Russian actions (in particular, unpredictability) created doubts in the West, and an emphasis on transparent and reciprocal rules of the road in economic activity, including transparency in the gas trade. Because "Plan Putin" boils down to catchwords on Russian strength and increased authority abroad, Renaissance Capital Investment VP Yelena Sharipova argued to us that Medvedev's writ remains large and largely uncircumscribed by Putin doctrine.

¶10. (C) In this context, some have interpreted the recent comments of PM Kudrin and RAO UES Chairman Chubais (ref c), critical of Russian foreign policy, as evidence that liberals are already emboldened by the Medvedev campaign's softer approach. (While Kudrin is closely identified with the economic reformers supporting Medvedev, the status of Chubais is less clear. His political party and business confidante, SPS Deputy Leonid Gozman told us that Chubais had negotiated and signed an agreement with the Kremlin prior to the Duma elections on a follow-on posting within the administration -- which Babayeva told us would be as head of the state corporation, Rosnanotechnology. However, Gozman posited that if Medvedev were to embrace Chubais overtly, it would place him in open opposition to Putin.)

The U.S. Conundrum

¶11. (C) The U.S. relationship may be Medvedev's most difficult, given the emphasis in the Kremlin on securing American recognition of Russian strategic importance. Medvedev traveled to the U.S. in February 2004, which is rarely mentioned here and the impression is that he underperformed. Babayeva underscored to us that Medvedev never made a return visit and it was former President Yeltsin's Chief of Staff Voloshin who putatively was entrusted with "selling the Medvedev presidency" to Washington in March 2006. Given Medvedev's European orientation (and particular comfort with the German relationship, after the multi-year dialogue with the

Chancellory that he conducted as Putin's chief of staff and then sustained after his move to the White House), we will need to work creatively to establish a rapport with the new president and set up structured channels of communication to his staff -- at the same time that we navigate Putin's continued influence (septel).

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